



The restaurant

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The possibilities and pitfalls of setting up shop on University Avenue

by Jocelyn Dong

Inside the cool, high-ceilinged building, with early afternoon sunlight glowing outside, a diminutive Franciscan monk intoned an Italian blessing.

"In nome del Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo. Amen," a brown-frocked Father Efrem said.

He lifted a wrinkled hand and cast holy water from a tiny plastic bottle toward the objects of his blessing, the droplets launching into the air and falling to the cement floor.

But Father Efrem was not in a cathedral, and his ritual was not for parishioners. He was standing in a new downtown Palo Alto restaurant, La Strada ("The Street"), the day before its Feb. 10 opening. The targets of his blessings: a wood-burning oven, a prized meat slicer and the 335 University Avenue location itself.

Calling on the divine may be Italian tradition, but given the fierce competition among downtown restaurants, bringing in a priest could be considered a strategic business move as well.

The 2,800-square-foot trattoria is the brainchild of former Il Fornaio chef-partner Donato Scotti and local real-estate businessman Salvatore Giovannotto. More than two years in the making, it enters a field already rife with competition. No fewer than 10 Italian restaurants offer up their pastas, pizzas and risottos within a 12-square-block area.

The trendy entertainment district is known for its revolving door of restaurant openings and closings. Blink, and your favorite place to grab a bite might have switched personalities -- and cuisines. Out with Good Earth's healthy foods, in with Lavanda's Mediterranean fare. Good-bye Perry's, hello Tamarine. So long S Bakery & Tea House, welcome Q Cup.

Eateries that hang on face new challengers: Some restaurateurs admit the December debut of the behemoth Cheesecake Factory has shaken their bottom lines.

But if operating a restaurant is not for the faint of heart, neither is starting a new one from the ground up. Take Scotti's and Giovannotto's effort to launch La Strada, for example. Over months, if not years, they -- like many ambitious restaurateurs -- had to navigate a maze of decisions, construction uncertainties, inspections and long hours while keeping an eye fixed on their ultimate goal.

Opening a restaurant can be an exhilarating challenge. But as the pair learned, it also takes stamina, determination, and a tremendous amount of patience.

Five hours after Father Efrem completed his priestly duties, dozens of Scotti's and Giovannotto's friends, family members and business associates arrived for the restaurant's rehearsal dinner. It was a chance for the newly hired wait staff and kitchen crew to work as a team before the next day's opening.

The space that was once a dark, hollow, dusty construction site came alive with the chatter of diners awaiting the meals. In the open kitchen, Scotti was poised in front of a Berkel Model 21 meat slicer, peering at orders as a small printer spewed the information out on tickets. His right hand moved hunks of cold-cut meats methodically along a rotating silver blade, his left hand catching the translucent slices as they peeled off the other side. Soon, fleet-footed waiters were ferrying plates of foccacia, cold cuts and olives to the tables. Near Scotti, one kitchen worker was inserting a round pizza paddle into the wood-burning oven. Other cooks were keeping the stove hopping.

Sitting at their tables, most guests were probably unaware of the thousands of decisions that led up to this dining experience -- from choosing the round, yellow, ceramic salt shakers out of dozens of styles, to mulling over imported espresso machines to designing the edge of the marble bar (it's angled, not classically rounded). For everything that exists in a restaurant, somebody at some point had to decide it should be there.

Those tasked with the responsibility had to weigh aesthetics, functionality and costs -- and hope dearly all the pieces would add up in the end to a cohesive whole. One major guideline the La Strada crew used was "the Italian factor": If it reminded Scotti of his native country, it probably made the final cut.

"We want to take you on a little trip to Italy in the 45 minutes you have to eat," Scotti said.

That meant ordering some items directly from his homeland: glass light fixtures, the espresso machine and coffee, to name a few.

Practicality also counted. When considering dishware last October, the chef picked up a white porcelain plate off of a table in his office, which was filled with sample dishes, glasses and utensils. He felt its rim underneath, trying to find one that wouldn't leave a black circle on the plate underneath from wear and tear when stacked.

Fortunately, some choices were a slam dunk -- like the steel and fire-engine red meat slicer Scotti affectionately calls "the Ferrari of slicers." Made in 1963, it once belonged to a butcher in the Lombardy region of Italy, where Scotti grew up. When the chef decided to open La Strada, he asked the machine be restored to provide paper-thin slices of prosciutto, salami, mortadella and other Italian meats to hungry Palo Altans.

Scotti and Giovannotto didn't originally plan to open the restaurant Feb. 10. When construction started in September, the day after Christmas was a more likely target. But a challenge familiar to residential remodelers -- construction delays, in some cases caused by unexpected code requirements -- became formidable hurdles.

In mid-November at the restaurant site, wires hung from the metal ceiling frame like a bundle of drying spaghetti. As the sounds of drills and morning traffic bounced off of the cement walls, five men huddled at the half-constructed bar, discussing how to put a hood on the wood-burning oven -- a new health department requirement that original plans hadn't accounted for.

Russ Williams, a metal fabrications expert, came down from Petaluma and brought a dozen copper samples. He, Scotti, Giovannotto and his son, Alex, and Larry Ballinger of Ballinger Restaurant Equipment were trying to find a solution. They'd already planned to tile the cylindrical oven; now someone suggested adding a shelf above.

Changing designs mid-stream is rarely ideal, but the group eventually chose a hammered copper hood and an accompanying metal rack, which would be decorated with copper pots and pans. Although Williams knew the restaurant's planned opening date, he was skeptical workers would be available before then.

"If it works, it works," Williams finally said, shaking Giovannotto's hand to seal the deal.

But the copper hood didn't get installed in December, and that factor -- along with a host of others -- meant the Dec. 26 deadline would come and go without a grand opening.

"It's almost frustrating to a degree because you imagine your dream coming true and going 'boom' (quickly). Instead, it's not," said Scotti. "A real dream come true is nail by nail, brick by brick, the wires going in, choosing the music we're going to have -- all those kinds of things."

More construction problems came and went. With the Feb. 10 deadline looming, several workers muttered that a subcontractor took an extra week to finish the floor, pushing everyone else's work back.

The week before the opening, Scotti and other staff were maneuvering around ladders and tools that still littered the space. A faux painter was methodically giving the sunflower-yellow walls an "Old World" finish. Wood workers trimmed baseboards as fast as they could in the alley behind the restaurant. Concrete tradesmen poured a new sidewalk out front, while stone workers affixed granite slabs along the restaurant's front wall.

At times, the pressure caused tempers to flare. When a health inspector found a problem with the air flow above the stove, two men got into a shouting match over whether it could be fixed in time.

Off to one side, recently hired general manager Michael Iglesias, a veteran of restaurant launches, acknowledged the tension: "Openings are rough."

According to Scotti, everyone in the local restaurant business pretty much knows everyone else - which is why hiring one's staff turns somewhat cannibalistic. To take care of the front of the house, Scotti brought on board Iglesias, a former Il Fornaio assistant general manager. Reportedly a few of the wait staff came over with him, as well as some workers from the kitchen. A server from another local restaurant is moonlighting at La Strada.

But hiring -- which started in November in anticipation of the original December opening -- is only part of getting a restaurant off the ground. Another big part is training, and the staff went through five days of service boot camp to learn about all the dishes on the menu, all 65 of the wines -- and which go best with which.

The Saturday before opening, Scotti stood at the head of a long table, teaching the wait staff about each dish -- and how to pronounce them.

"PEET-sah con sal-SEE-cha," he said of the sausage pizza, and the chorus of wait staff contorted their mouths, echoing him.

Later, the kitchen staff crowded around as the chef demonstrated his style of pizza making. Expertly, Scotti picked up a circle of dough, fingering it so the dough spun and stretched to the size of a jumbo Frisbee. Then he gathered pinches of salt, flour, Parmesan cheese, rosemary and a dash of olive oil, gesturing as he showed them how to dress each pizza. It would take some time for the staff to learn to do things his way, Scotti acknowledged.

Likewise, wine vendor Romano Chietti of Siena Imports said it usually takes the wait staff a few months to become intimately familiar with the wine list. Although he came to the training with bottles and information, there was only so much the staff could absorb before the opening. Much of the learning will take place after customers start asking waiters about specific wines, he said. When Chietti comes back to give a second training after three months, he predicted, the staff will have a sharper knowledge and plenty of questions.

All of this activity -- the training, the blessing ceremony, taking care of details -- was part of the push, the final week before opening.

It was time for myriad deliveries to stock up the restaurant. Scheduling them all kept Iglesias', Scotti's and others' cell phones constantly ringing. Cardboard boxes lined the marble bar -- Oneida glasses, Classico ice-tea spoons -- each needing to be emptied, and their contents washed and stored. Kitchen staff started prepping food -- peeling potatoes, pureeing tomatoes.

Scotti, his body language a mix of excitement and tiredness, was making last-minute negotiations by phone to get a much-needed pizza plate from a vendor. This final week, he frequently worked at the restaurant until 1 a.m., returning at 6 a.m. the next morning.

Would-be customers were starting to take notice of the new restaurant. Iglesias took La Strada's first reservation on Monday, for Valentine's Day. A young couple stopped by and inquired about using the facility for their wedding reception. Other passersby poked their heads in to ask when the place would open.

"Tuesday," Scotti joked, "but take your time."

At some point in every opening, there comes a paradigm shift -- when work ceases to be about preparing for the opening and starts focusing on actually running a restaurant, and construction concerns are finally let go in order to concentrate on hospitality. Even with mirrors still needing to be hung, a railing yet to be mounted and other elements unfinished, the deadline had arrived.

A half-hour before the rehearsal dinner, as night began to fall, Scotti took a break and stood outside on the sidewalk, looking up at the façade of his new restaurant. In curved letters, it read: "La Strada Ristorante Italiano." Months of construction behind him, with the lights inside casting a glow onto the street, Scotti paused to take it in.

Then, he went back in and addressed the wait staff. "The beginning's going to be really hard. But it's going to be great and it's going to get better," Scotti told them. "Thank you for joining us at La Strada -- my dream come true."

With that, the chef headed for the kitchen, ready to start the next phase of his restaurant's life: Welcoming guests and hopefully creating return customers.

"(People ask), 'Oh, are you worried about the Cheesecake Factory, you worried about this, you worried about that?' No! We really have to worry about me doing a good job -- that's what it comes down to," Scotti said. "I have to believe that I can do it, otherwise I wouldn't be here trying to put together a restaurant. I have to believe it -- but I also do believe it."

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